

News Release



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Contacts: Roy Stearns
(916) 654-7538

Joe Rosato
(916) 324-1576

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Significant Results System Wide

State Parks' Rescue Efforts for Snowy Plover Proving Successful Along the California Coast

SACRAMENTO – Protection efforts implemented by California State Parks for the threatened western snowy plover shorebird resulted in significant increases in the number of birds that hatched and survived at state parks along the California coast during the most recent nesting season, officials reported today.

"California State Parks and its many partners and visitors are working hard to see that the young plovers survive, and I'm pleased that our efforts are truly making a difference," said California State Parks Director Ruth Coleman.

According to reports from biologists and field observers, 548 nests were found in State Park System units in 2003, a 24 percent increase in the number of nests documented the year before. Of the total nests, 344 were reported successful at hatching at least one egg, a 52 percent increase over 2002.

The reports show that a total of 967 chicks hatched, more than double the number reported the previous year. Most of this success can be attributed to an increase in breeding bird numbers, additional nest protection, including restrictions on dog use of some beaches, predator management and cooperation from the public in avoiding nesting areas. Some increase was due to more rigorous surveying of nesting habitats. Of the 707 chicks banded or otherwise closely observed, 49 percent were reported to have reached fledging age (about 30 days from hatching), up from a 35 percent fledge rate in 2002.

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The western snowy plover is about the size of a sparrow. It is pale gray-brown above and white below, with dark markings on its head and around its neck. Because of declining numbers -- it is estimated that, at most, there are only about 2,000 breeding plovers left along the entire Pacific Coast -- it is listed as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. After the Fish and Wildlife Service published guidelines for protecting the species, California State Parks expanded management measures in its coastal parks that provide important nesting or wintering habitat for the bird.

These measures include fencing or roping off areas, restricting human activities that disturb the birds, predator control, prohibiting dogs in important habitat areas and increasing enforcement of existing dog leash laws on California state beaches. Of the approximately 2,000 snowy plovers nesting on the West Coast of the United States, about 1,800 nest on the coastline of California. About one-quarter of the California coast is within State Parks jurisdiction.

Currently, 30 state parks along the coast have special management actions in place, including visitor education and interpretation, park staff training, nest area monitoring and nest site protection. The Department's efforts to protect and restore populations of the threatened bird continue to yield promising results, according to biologists with the California State Parks who have compiled and reviewed reports on last year's nesting season.

Of the total 548 nests observed in the State Park System in 2003, 319 (or 58 percent) were in state park units in San Luis Obispo County. The most successful of these nests were in Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area and Montana de Oro State Park, where 67 percent of the reported nests hatched at least one chick.

At Oceano, 95 nests were reported, with 63 known to be successful. That is up from a total of 35 nests reported in 2002, 25 of which were successful. Nests in 2003 produced 162 chicks, with at least 107 (66 percent) of them known to have reached fledgling age. Last year's numbers were 62 chicks and 35 fledglings (56 percent).

At Montana de Oro State Park north of Oceano, 150 nests were reported, with at least 100 nests (67 percent) successful. That is up from a total of 109 nests, with 28 (40 percent) successful. Nests this year were reported to have a total of 260 chicks. The number of chicks that actually fledged was not determined because of the difficulty of banding and counting chicks in this remote area.

Success rates in State Park units in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties also were up significantly. In those counties, 161 nests were identified. Of those nests, 114 (71 percent) were successful in hatching 356 chicks, a 40 percent increase over the number of chicks hatched the previous year. The number of chicks that fledged in 2003 -- 218 chicks -- represents a 132 percent increase over 2002. This area has the longest record of plover monitoring and protection in the state, dating back to the mid-1980s. Management actions in the region, including extensive monitoring of bird activity, is presently undertaken through a close partnership between California State Parks, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, and others.

Thirty-six nests (7 percent of the 548 nests on State Park System lands) were in state parks in San Diego County; and the remaining 31 nests (6 percent) were from Little River State Beach, Manchester State Park, Half Moon Bay State Beach and McGrath State Beach.

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